FRANCIS SPUFFORD

Red Plenty: Inside the Fifties' Soviet Dream

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Red Plenty is a novel – or perhaps more accurately a short story cycle – about Soviet central planning, set in a decade-long arc across the 1960s. At the end of the 1950s, after the success of Sputnik and with the Soviet Union having come out of Stalin's dark shadow with impressive growth rates, there were many, outside the country as well as inside, who thought that central planning was the way of the future. Red Plenty tells the stories of some of those people, of their ideals, their experiences, and their disillusionments.
Each of the eighteen chapters is told from a single perspective, with five of these repeating to give thirteen protagonists. Some of these, and many of the other characters, are real figures or modelled on real figures, while others are entirely imaginary. The chapters would almost work as self-contained short stories, with good narrative flow, convincing dialogue and appealing characters, but they are interconnected, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, and work together to form a broader mosaic.

A young mathematical prodigy (Kantorovich) has the idea for an approximation method for linear optimisation while on a tram in Leningrad in 1938.

A Soviet chairman (Khruschev) visits the United States, where his failure to communicate with his hosts illustrates both his idealism and his confidence.

An eager young Komsomol member has a life-changing encounter with little plastic beakers at the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959.

A young, up-and-coming economist treks into the countryside to meet his fiancée's family, becoming acquainted with the traumas of a rural sector managed as an extractive resource.

An economist-politician (Nemchinov) brings together some of the key figures working on new economic ideas, helping to give their work the necessary Marxist-Leninist gloss.

A computer designer (Lebedev) gives us a view of the indigenous Soviet computer manufacturing capability.

A songwriter (Galich) meets with a newspaper editor who wants his help writing a piece on what life will be like in 1980.

A biologist arrives in Akademgorodok, a specially constructed research city in Siberia, and is introduced to the unusual freedoms it offers, as well as to some of the economists and cyberneticians working for the introduction of more rational pricing.

A low-level party functionary witnesses the massacre of protesting workers at Novocherkassk.

An accident at a viscose plant is seen first from the point of view of a planner at Gosplan, in the heart of the national planning system, and then from the point of view of one of the plant managers.

A "fixer" in the town of Sverdlovsk keeps the economy working by routing goods and favours outside the official plan, relying on a vast network of informal contacts, but his status remains precarious.

Khruschev's chauffeur witnesses his fall from power, looking on as his car is downgraded.

The last five chapters return us to previous points-of-view, illustrating the persistence of ideals but their failure in the face of the system.

When our no longer so young economist realises that a key element of proposed reforms – pricing by calculation rather than political diktat – is going to be abandoned, he risks his position to speak out.

The now grown up Komsomol member gives birth, in a memorable account of a Soviet labour ward.

Lebedev, dying of cancer, has to witness the Soviet Union's abandonment of an independent computer design capability.

The biologist describes her own fall from grace amid a broader crackdown on freedom in Akademgorodok.

And Khruschev suffers from boredom in forced retirement in his dacha.

The details and background in each of these stories are more important than the events in these one sentence summaries. The cumulative effect is to give a picture of what life

was like in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, in different parts of society, and to explore not just the functioning of the planning system and the debates behind it but its entanglements with the broader world. (There are also two set piece attempts, taking up most of the chapters told from Lebedev's perspective, to convey some science through narrative: a low-level account of a computer functioning and a "molecular story" explaining how lung cancer starts.)

There is no awkward "info-dump" in any of this, however. Instead, background information is provided in six short passages of direct exposition interspersed among the chapters. These pitch the idea of central planning and abundance as a Russian fairy tale, briefly describe the origins of the Soviet Union and the working of its economy in the 1950s, provide an explanation of how Gosplan worked, and so forth. There are also fifty pages of notes and a twelve page bibliography (limited to secondary sources in English, since Spufford is up front about knowing no Russian). Including extensive historical background is not that unusual for the genre, however, and Red Plenty remains a historical novel. (The bulk of it happens after 1960, so it doesn't quite abide by the "fifty year" rule, but the cultural distance is large enough to make up for that.)

Nor is Spufford ever at all didactic, describing Soviet society and policy rather than prescribing or proscribing it. No doubt many will read Red Plenty as illustrating the inevitable failure of central planning, but others may see in it the possibility that things might have worked rather better with a more open political system, or even with a better approximation to a Platonic philosopher king than Khruschev. (This is not something Spufford ventures into at all, but the tools developed by Kantorovich and his colleagues are widely used in the capitalist world, most notably within the domains of central planning and command economy that are modern corporations.)

There is little room in all this for character development, but Spufford handles his broad cast with skill. His protagonists are not just embedded differently in the world but are emotionally and intellectually and socially and individually differentiated, and we end up wanting to know more about them and about what happens to them. Red Plenty also feels too short because there are so many aspects of Soviet life and its political economy on which it only touches, creating an open-ended feeling even though we know how the story ends.

Red Plenty is an unusual conception, carried off with aplomb. Read it to learn something about the Soviet Union in the 1960s, a world which now seems very distant. Read it for an exploration of the ideas surrounding central planning and its political and technical problems. Or read it just for fun.